

# Review of: "Taking Back Control Over Academic Publications"

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**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

The article is an engaging opinion piece. It provides a useful overview of the historical development of the scholarly communication environment (how we got to where we are now) and makes a case for major changes to the system (how we need to change direction). The argument is made in a robust and credible way. There is the occasional rhetorical turn of phrase, but for an opinion piece, that is acceptable! Arguments like this have been made before, but it is useful to have a clear presentation of the arguments in a contemporary context.

The fundamental argument of the piece is that there ought to be a shift from highly commercial to community-based scholarly communication models. The preferred model would involve open access to content, although that fundamental point is rather buried. The main place open access is stated to be the basis of a proposed reformed system is in the sentence, "Taking ownership of all their scholarly output by means of these repositories, academic institutions could ensure long-term archival, open access, prevention of tampering with publications, and clear attribution to authors and their affiliations." Perhaps the authors could specify what their proposed system could look like more clearly, including its characteristics relating to openness.

With that in mind, perhaps the authors could talk more explicitly about publishing models in general. It is not clear in the piece how the infrastructure provided by repositories would relate to peer review or other quality assurance processes, for example. At the moment, the assumption seems to be that the conventional model of pre-publication peer review, followed by selection, and then publication, would be retained. Is this the case, or could/should more innovative publishing models be used, e.g., 'publish, review, curate' models? Arguably, this might be more appropriate for a repository-based infrastructure, with peer review acting as an overlay on top of that infrastructure. Arguably, the conventional model of pre-publication peer review is one based on paper-based thinking, where page space is limited. That constraint does not necessarily need to apply in a digital environment. Perhaps the authors might clarify what possible models they have in mind.

The authors assert, "Publications began to exist as files on the Internet. Running digital platforms was not free, but was much cheaper." There is no evidence for this cited, and it would be useful to have some. However, whether or not overall costs are lower, isn't the key point that the *marginal costs* of distributing to a wide audience are much lower for digital content? Once the costs of producing the first copy (or first view) are paid for, the costs of providing access to others are very low online. Unlike hard copy, where items have to be printed and distributed, the additional costs of providing digital access to 10 people as against 100 or 1,000 people are very low.

This comment leads to what I think is a major gap in the argument: who pays the costs of publishing and how? Costs may or may not be lower, but they still exist. The paper does not address the question of how they should be borne directly. It might be inferred from the argument that institutions (universities, etc.) should pay the costs, but that is not stated clearly enough and is not elaborated in a persuasive way. I suggest that the issue of costs and where in the system they should be borne should be worked through more clearly for this article to have real value.

I am interested in the authors' proposal for combining internal and external peer review but do not think they explain the benefits of this clearly enough. Why, in particular, could an internal peer review (which might be argued to lack impartiality) be useful?

The shift from quantity to quality proposed by the authors is interesting and one that is likely to receive a sympathetic hearing from many. However, the argument is not clear. Is the argument that quantity should be deliberately limited in some way? If so, how should that happen? The authors suggest that useful information could be mined from a wider set of outputs, e.g., theses. Isn't this an argument that technology might be used to negate challenges to do with quantity, and so limiting quantity is unnecessary? This might be made clearer, I would suggest.

The authors suggest any future system could continue to be informed by (but not driven by) citation metrics. However, are there other kinds of metrics that could or should be included within a basket of metrics that could more usefully act as quality markers? What about usage metrics, for example?

The authors cite a selection of relevant references, but citations are few and far between. This may be appropriate for an opinion piece, but it does leave some assertions unevidenced. For example, "Concurrently, alterations in the funding model of universities resulted in substantial budgetary reductions, significantly impacting the sustainability of university libraries." I would suggest assertions like this could usefully be evidenced.

The writing of the piece is mostly good, but there are some problems with the language. Sometimes what looks like an inappropriate word is used. For example, "In the 1980s, the infiltration of neoliberal principles into academic governance and planning." "Infiltration" sounds conspiratorial – surreptitious access with disguised motives. Even if the authors wish to use terms like "neoliberal" unexplained, then I would suggest words like "infiltration" should be avoided. On the other hand, "neoliberal" should be explained at least briefly, I would suggest, as it is ambiguous (Flew, 2014).

However, most of the language issues are low-level stylistic problems, often rather unidiomatic turns of phrase. I realise that where English is not the first language of the authors (which I assume is the case here), this may often be true, but I would recommend that the piece is thoroughly proofed for its English. Just a couple of examples of where improvements could be made follow. In the abstract, the sentence, "Over the last decades, we witnessed a steep increase in the number of publications, while the number of scientific publishing plummeted drastically as well," might be better as something like: "Over recent decades, we have witnessed a steep increase in the number of publications, while at the same time the number of scientific publishers has declined drastically." By the way, has the total number of publishers actually declined globally, or has the share of the top publishers of the market increased, the number of publishers responsible for, say,

50% of publications? Larivière et al. (2015) observe, “the top five most prolific publishers account for more than 50% of all papers published in 2013.”

There are other stylistic issues. For instance, the phrase “the oldest continuously publishing scientific journal” is clunky, particularly “...continuously publishing.” The phrase “...continuously-published...” would be better.

## References

Flew, T. (2014). Six theories of neoliberalism. *Thesis Eleven*, 122(1), 49–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513614535965>

Larivière, V., Haustein, S., & Mongeon, P. (2015). The oligopoly of academic publishers in the digital era. *PLOS ONE*, 10(6), e0127502. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0127502>